

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
WESTERN DIVISION

DOMINIQUE SCARDY,

Plaintiff,

vs.

SHELBY COUNTY,

Defendant.

No. 11-2677-JDT-tmp

ORDER OF DISMISSAL
ORDER CERTIFYING APPEAL NOT TAKEN IN GOOD FAITH
AND
ORDER DENYING LEAVE TO PROCEED IN FORMA PAUPERIS ON APPEAL

On August 5, 2011, Plaintiff Dominique Scardy, prisoner number 11116296, an inmate at the Shelby County Criminal Justice Center (“Jail”) in Memphis, Tennessee, filed a pro se complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, accompanied by a motion seeking leave to proceed in forma pauperis. (Docket Entry (“D.E.”) 1, D.E. 2.) The Court issued an order on August 31, 2011, that granted leave to proceed in forma pauperis and assessed the civil filing fee. (D.E. 5.) The Clerk shall record the defendant as Shelby County.¹

Plaintiff Scardy alleges that, on May 2, 2011, he was required to sleep on a plastic bunk due to overcrowding at the jail. Plaintiff alleges that the lack of a mat caused problems with his shoulders. When Plaintiff complained, he was provided with an “extra” mat. (D.E. 1 at 2.) Plaintiff also alleges that, on April 23, 2011, he was assigned to a top bunk despite suffering from problems with his right knee and back. (Id.) Scardy alleges that he

¹ Plaintiff named the Shelby County Jail as the Defendant. Governmental departments, divisions, and buildings are not suable entities. Therefore, the Court construes those claims against Shelby County. See generally Hafer v. Melo, 502 U. S. 21 (1991).

slipped while trying to mount the top bunk and hurt his back. Plaintiff requests that Shelby County be held liable for his medical problems, pain, and suffering.

The Court is required to screen prisoner complaints and to dismiss any complaint, or any portion thereof, if the complaint—

(1) is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted; or

(2) seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b); see also 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B).

In assessing whether the complaint in this case states a claim on which relief may be granted, the standards under Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6), as stated in Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 677-79, 129 S. Ct. 1937, 1949-50, 173 L. Ed. 2d 868 (2009), and in Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 555-57, 127 S. Ct. 1955, 1964-66, 167 L. Ed. 2d 929 (2007), are applied. Hill v. Lappin, 630 F.3d 468, 470-71 (6th Cir. 2010). “Accepting all well-pleaded allegations in the complaint as true, the Court ‘consider[s] the factual allegations in [the] complaint to determine if they plausibly suggest an entitlement to relief.’” Williams v. Curtin, 631 F.3d 380, 383 (6th Cir. 2011) (quoting Iqbal, 556 U.S. at 681, 129 S. Ct. at 1951) (alteration in original). “[P]leadings that . . . are no more than conclusions . . . are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations.” Iqbal, 556 U.S. at 679, 129 S. Ct. at 1950; see also Twombly, 550 U.S. at 555 n.3, 127 S. Ct. at 1964-65 n.3 (“Rule 8(a)(2) still requires a ‘showing,’ rather than a blanket assertion, of entitlement to relief. Without some factual allegation in the complaint, it is hard to see how a claimant could satisfy the requirement of providing not only ‘fair notice’ of the nature of the claim, but also ‘grounds’ on which the claim rests.”).

“A complaint can be frivolous either factually or legally. See Neitzke [v. Williams], 490 U.S. [319,] 325, 109 S. Ct. at 1827 [(1989)]. Any complaint that is legally

frivolous would ipso facto fail to state a claim upon which relief can be granted. See id. at 328-29, 109 S. Ct. 1827.” Hill, 630 F.3d at 470.

Whether a complaint is factually frivolous under §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) is a separate issue from whether it fails to state a claim for relief. Statutes allowing a complaint to be dismissed as frivolous give “judges not only the authority to dismiss a claim based on an indisputably meritless legal theory, but also the unusual power to pierce the veil of the complaint’s factual allegations and dismiss those claims whose factual contentions are clearly baseless.” Neitzke, 490 U.S. at 327, 109 S. Ct. 1827 (interpreting 28 U.S.C. § 1915). Unlike a dismissal for failure to state a claim, where a judge must accept all factual allegations as true, Iqbal, 129 S. Ct. at 1949-50, a judge does not have to accept “fantastic or delusional” factual allegations as true in prisoner complaints that are reviewed for frivolousness. Neitzke, 490 U.S. at 327-28, 109 S. Ct. 1827.

Id. at 471.

“Pro se complaints are to be held ‘to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers,’ and should therefore be liberally construed.” Williams, 631 F.3d at 383 (quoting Martin v. Overton, 391 F.3d 710, 712 (6th Cir. 2004)). Pro se litigants and prisoners are not exempt from the requirements of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. As the Sixth Circuit has explained:

Before the recent onslaught of pro se prisoner suits, the Supreme Court suggested that pro se complaints are to be held to a less stringent standard than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers. See Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 92 S. Ct. 594, 30 L. Ed. 2d 652 (1972) (per curiam). Neither that Court nor other courts, however, have been willing to abrogate basic pleading essentials in pro se suits. See, e.g., id. at 521, 92 S. Ct. at 596 (holding petitioner to standards of Conley v. Gibson); Merritt v. Faulkner, 697 F.2d 761 (7th Cir.) (duty to be less stringent with pro se complaint does not require court to conjure up unplead allegations), cert. denied, 464 U.S. 986, 104 S. Ct. 434, 78 L. Ed. 2d 3366 (1983); McDonald v. Hall, 610 F.2d 16 (1st Cir.1979) (same); Jarrell v. Tisch, 656 F. Supp. 237 (D.D.C. 1987) (pro se plaintiffs should plead with requisite specificity so as to give defendants notice); Holsey v. Collins, 90 F.R.D. 122 (D. Md. 1981) (even pro se litigants must meet some minimum standards).

Wells v. Brown, 891 F.2d 591, 594 (6th Cir. 1989); see also Brown v. Matauszk, No. 09-2259, 2011 WL 285251, at *5 (6th Cir. Jan. 31, 2011) (affirming dismissal of pro se complaint for failure to comply with “unique pleading requirements” and stating “a court cannot ‘create a claim which [a plaintiff] has not spelled out in his pleading’”) (quoting Clark

v. Nat'l Travelers Life Ins. Co., 518 F.2d 1167, 1169 (6th Cir. 1975)) (alteration in original); Payne v. Secretary of Treas., 73 F. App'x 836, 837 (6th Cir. 2003) (affirming sua sponte dismissal of complaint pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2) and stating, "[n]either this court nor the district court is required to create Payne's claim for her"); cf. Pliler v. Ford, 542 U.S. 225, 231 (2004) ("District judges have no obligation to act as counsel or paralegal to pro se litigants.").

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege two elements: (1) a deprivation of rights secured by the "Constitution and laws" of the United States (2) committed by a defendant acting under color of state law. Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co., 398 U.S. 144, 150 (1970).

Plaintiff has sued only Shelby County. When a § 1983 claim is made against a municipality, the court must analyze two distinct issues: (1) whether plaintiff's harm was caused by a constitutional violation; and (2) if so, whether the municipality is responsible for that violation. Collins v. City of Harker Heights, Tex., 503 U.S. 115, 120 (1992). The second issue is dispositive of Plaintiff's claim against Shelby County.

A local government "cannot be held liable solely because it employs a tortfeasor—or, in other words, a municipality cannot be held liable under § 1983 on a respondeat superior theory." Monell v. Dep't. of Soc. Serv., 436 U.S. 658, 691 (1978) (emphasis in original); see also Searcy v. City of Dayton, 38 F.3d 282, 286 (6th Cir. 1994); Berry v. City of Detroit, 25 F.3d 1342, 1345 (6th Cir. 1994). A municipality cannot be held responsible for a constitutional deprivation unless there is a direct causal link between a municipal policy or custom and the alleged constitutional deprivation. Monell, 436 U.S. at 691-92; Deaton v. Montgomery Co., Ohio, 989 F.2d 885, 889 (6th Cir. 1993). To demonstrate municipal liability, a plaintiff "must (1) identify the municipal policy or custom, (2) connect the policy to the municipality, and (3) show that his particular injury was incurred due to execution of that policy." Alkire v. Irving, 330 F.3d 802, 815 (6th Cir. 2003)

(citing Garner v. Memphis Police Dep't, 8 F.3d 358, 364 (6th Cir. 1993)). “Where a government ‘custom has not received formal approval through the body’s official decisionmaking channels,’ such a custom may still be the subject of a § 1983 suit.” Alkire, 330 F.3d at 815 (quoting Monell, 436 U.S. at 690-91). The policy or custom “must be ‘the moving force of the constitutional violation’ in order to establish the liability of a government body under § 1983.” Searcy, 38 F.3d at 286 (quoting Polk Co. v. Dodson, 454 U.S. at 326 (citation omitted)). “[T]he touchstone of ‘official policy’ is designed ‘to distinguish acts of the municipality from acts of employees of the municipality, and thereby make clear that municipal liability is limited to action for which the municipality is actually responsible.’” City of St. Louis v. Praprotnik, 485 U.S. 112, 138 (1988) (quoting Pembaur v. Cincinnati, 475 U.S. 469, 479-80 (1986)) (emphasis in original).

Although civil rights plaintiffs are not required to plead the facts demonstrating municipal liability with particularity, Leatherman v. Tarrant County Narcotics Intelligence & Coordination Unit, 507 U.S. 163, 168-69 (1993), the complaint must be sufficient to put the municipality on notice of the plaintiff’s theory of liability, *see, e.g.,* Fowler v. Campbell, Civil Action No. 3:06CV-P610-H, 2007 WL 1035007, at *2 (W.D. Ky. Mar. 30, 2007); Yeackering v. Ankrom, No. 4:05-CV-00018-M, 2005 WL 1877964, at *2 (W.D. Ky. Aug. 5, 2005); Oliver v. City of Memphis, No. 04-2074-B, 2004 WL 3316242, at *4 (W.D. Tenn. Dec. 2, 2004); *cf.* Raub v. Correctional Med. Servs., Inc., No. 06-13942, 2008 WL 160611, at *2 (E.D. Mich. Jan. 15, 2008) (denying motion to dismiss where complaint contained conclusory allegations of a custom or practice); Cleary v. County of Macomb, No. 06-15505, 2007 WL 2669102, at *20 (E.D. Mich. Sept. 6, 2007) (same); Morningstar v. City of Detroit, No. 06-11073, 2007 WL 2669156, at *8 (E.D. Mich. Sept. 6, 2007) (same); Chidester v. City of Memphis, No. 02-2556 MA/A, 2006 WL 1421099, at *3 (W.D. Tenn. June 15, 2005). The allegations of the complaint fail to identify an official policy or custom which caused injury to Plaintiff. Instead, it appears that Plaintiff is suing Shelby County because he was

confined in a county institution and the County employed persons who allegedly violated his rights.

Therefore, the Court DISMISSES the complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and 1915A. Judgment shall be entered for Defendant.

The Court must also consider whether Plaintiff should be allowed to appeal this decision in forma pauperis, should he seek to do so. The United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit requires that all district courts in the circuit determine, in all cases where the appellant seeks to proceed in forma pauperis, whether the appeal would be frivolous. Twenty-eight U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) provides that “[a]n appeal may not be taken in forma pauperis if the trial court certifies in writing that it is not taken in good faith.”

The good faith standard is an objective one. Coppedge v. United States, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). The test under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a) for whether an appeal is taken in good faith is whether the litigant seeks appellate review of any non-frivolous issue. Id. at 445-46. It would be inconsistent for a district court to determine that a complaint should be dismissed prior to service on the defendants, but has sufficient merit to support an appeal in forma pauperis. See Williams v. Kullman, 722 F.2d 1048, 1050 n.1 (2d Cir. 1983). The same considerations that lead the Court to dismiss this case for failure to state a claim also compel the conclusion that an appeal would not be taken in good faith. It is therefore CERTIFIED, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3), that any appeal in this matter by Plaintiff would not be taken in good faith and Plaintiff may not proceed on appeal in forma pauperis.

The final matter to be addressed is the assessment of a filing fee if Plaintiff appeals the dismissal of this case. In McGore v. Wrigglesworth, 114 F.3d 601, 610-11 (6th Cir. 1997), the Sixth Circuit set out specific procedures for implementing the PLRA. Therefore, Plaintiff is instructed that, if he wishes to take advantage of the installment procedures for paying the appellate filing fee, he must comply with the procedures set out in McGore and 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b).

For analysis under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g) of future filings, if any, by Plaintiff, this is the first dismissal of one of his cases as frivolous or for failure to state a claim. This “strike” shall take effect, without further action by the Court, upon expiration of the time for filing a notice of appeal, the dismissal of any appeal, or the affirmation of the district court’s ruling on appeal, whichever is later.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/ **James D. Todd**
JAMES D. TODD
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE